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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights certain cultural models that have been effective in swaying culturally inexperienced teachers to reflect upon their attitudes and biases toward culture and literacy. It presents the actual reflections of student teachers as they respond to learning about cultural models of learning and discourse that may differ from their own. Among the materials provided to teachers for reflection are an ethnographic study that details oral culture among Muslim youth; a provocative video documentary on race entitled "The Color of Fear;" and an essay by Sonia Nieto entitled "Moving Beyond Tolerance in Multicultural Education." Some of the many realizations that teachers have made as a result of this reflection include the new understanding that Qur'anic recitation is a valuable, literacy-enhancing practice among Muslims; intense, reflective dialogue among members of different racial groups (as witnessed in "The Color of Fear") can yield powerful changes in one's systems of thought; and reading articles such as Nieto's can challenge people to move to higher levels of multicultural education and realize their own shortcomings. This cultural curriculum brought about actual changes in how teachers perceived cultural discourse and their own positions in such an exchange. (Contains 18 references.) (SM)

**Shaping Teachers' Minds:
Reflections on Cultural Discourse
Presented by
Marina Aminy and
Aspasia Neophytos-Richardson, Ed.D.
to the
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Shaping Teachers' Minds: Reflections on Cultural Discourse

I. Originality of the Problem

With recent educational reform in the state of California requiring all Teacher Education courses to be focused on the teaching and working with a diverse student body, instructors in teacher education programs are quickly realizing that a change in approach is needed. As researchers and instructors in teacher education programs, we are well aware of the narrow perspectives on culture, literacy and achievement that many potential teachers hold upon deciding to enter the profession. In this paper, we seek to highlight certain cultural models that have been particularly effective in swaying culturally inexperienced teachers to reflect on their attitudes and biases toward culture and literacy. Specifically, we will present the actual reflections of teachers as they respond to learning about cultural models of learning and discourse that may differ from their own. Among the materials provided to teachers for reflection are 1) an ethnographic study by one of the researchers detailing oral culture among Muslim youth, 2) a provocative video documentary on race called "The Color of Fear" directed by Lee, Mun Wah, and 3) an essay by Sonia Nieto entitled "Moving Beyond Tolerance in Multicultural Education."

II. Contribution to the Field of Education

Current education planning is focused on preparing children for the increasingly interdependent (economically, technologically, politically, ecologically) world of diverse (culturally, linguistically, ethnically) societies they will graduate into. This places an obligation on teacher educators. Given the deep chasm that divides the experience of most teacher candidates, who are Euro-American, English-speaking, and the unwitting

recipients of "White Privilege," from the experiences of communities of color, it must be our purpose, now, to challenge stereotypes and to transform the way we look at each other and ourselves. However, exposing the contradictions between democratic ideals and actual manifestations of inequality makes many people uncomfortable, and this includes educators. Yet, people need to understand how their lives are woven into the fabric of the world and what role they can play in improving life for themselves and their community. In reflecting on her unspoken privilege after viewing the "Color of Fear" video, a Euro-American female candidate reflects, *"Coincidentally, my cultural informant [an immigrant from Yemen], who was beautiful and interesting and intelligent and courageous and friendly, looked at me during our conversation and said that I looked familiar to her. We figured out that both she and I had fifth grade girls at the same elementary school last year. I am searching my mind to explain why she knew my face and I didn't know hers."*

When confronted with teaching/learning experiences that do not match their own, today's teachers must be able to assess the judgments they make in order to become more supportive of the learning of their students. In traditional education, the teacher possesses the knowledge and passes it on to students. In this model, teachers are sometimes students and students are sometimes teachers in the mutual development of cultural literacy. Once teachers acknowledge the powerful influence that culture and past experience have on their present thoughts and actions, they simultaneously clarify the relationship between their own lives and those of their students. Teacher candidates, in becoming the authors of their own narratives, concomitantly develop the powerful agency to bring about positive change. One student stated that, *"I walked away from class that*

night with a sense of understanding and sympathy for those who have lived most of their lives in this country and now are being punished by others because of what they look like."

III. Methodology and Theoretical Frameworks

Bellah and colleagues (1985) write that what is needed from history is not merely information about the past, but some idea of how one has gotten from the past to the present, and Luis Moll in *Vygotskian Perspectives on Literacy Research* (2000) comments, "through the process of enculturation, older persons arrange for younger ones to acquire the accumulated artifacts of the group or culture." A highlight of one such cultural model presented to teacher educators was the investigation of a Qur'an teacher's instruction in an Islamic school to see:

- How language is used in the socialization of children?
- To what degree is the language used planned or spontaneous?
- What specific language learning theories drive the pedagogy and instruction?
- What sorts of Islamic oral traditions are passed on to children attending the school and how is this feat accomplished?

The research was guided by the theories of, among others, Daniel Wagner's (1987) *Childhood Literacy Acquisition in Rural Morocco*, which indicated that "Qur'anic schooling also plays a role as a socializing agent and as an institution for instruction in religious and cultural values and ethics." Since the method of instruction, teacher-centered, authoritarian and strict, challenged the researcher's particular biases regarding effective teaching practices, it was virtually impossible for her to know if this class was hurting/helping the children. However, Brian Street (1987) emphasizes that the kinds of

literacies offered by the Qur'an present a rich variety of literacy experiences and skills. The researcher admits that this short ethnography was a *"journey within the self to question my own biases about literacy, language learning, Islam and research, and it forces one to admit that answers come from those who are studied, not necessarily from the researcher."*

When candidates in a teacher education program listened to the researcher discuss her work, and read about the full ethnographic study, many responded positively and introspectively. One student said, *"As Marina talked I could visualize the children at the Islamic school reciting the phrases from the Qur'an. I could visualize the spirit of the children as they said the lines out loud. It is the spirit inside each of us that makes us different people but also connects us with cultures around the world. We are all spiritual people, some with hate and anger and some with love and peace."*

Still another student compared the information to her own teaching: *"I was intrigued by the idea of Qur'anic Recitation and couldn't help but compare it to learning one's math tables in elementary school. The idea that you are exposed to the proper structure and pronunciation by rote memorization and recitation of the Koran seems a reasonable one."*

This example of self-reflection and transformation as a process of teaching and learning requires educators to examine the condition of their own democratic and caring process within the context of school and community. In other words, teachers must become conscious of the prejudgments that order their lives based on their cultural traditions and past experiences (Ricoeur, 1992). As they reflect upon their own cultural responses in the classroom and beyond, by a transformative process of self-

understanding, they develop empathy regarding the cultural contexts affecting the thinking and behavior of their students. Each person's voice and life narrative become important to growth in the context of the classroom.

The model of teaching and learning discussed here is focused on bringing learners to a deeper self-understanding through the transformative power of text, where text is understood to be literature, film and visual art, performance, conversation, or anything with which the learner is engaged. The Creative Reading/Writing Process, adapted by Alma Flor Ada (1997) from the work of Paolo Freire (1973/1997), is very effective in bringing students and teachers to voice. Reading and writing define each other and cannot be separated - hence the term reading/writing. It is the process by which the reader becomes exposed to the indivisible connection between the world within and that outside. Instead of the traditional approach of seeing literacy as the decoding of symbols, literacy here becomes the door to self-knowledge. There is a sense of "possibility" and openness to each other that develops in the classroom. Through the process of interactive reflection, mutual respect grows between teacher and students, and they begin to share their dreams and fears, pains and pleasures. Students develop an enhanced sense of personal emancipation and a deeper understanding of the fundamental interconnectedness of all human existence.

In formulating the reading/writing framework, Ada helped bring to light the way in which critical literacy occurs. It essentially clarifies four distinct phases of reading/writing that are here exemplified by reflections from various candidates upon reading Nieto's article:

1. Descriptive Phase: Readers attempt briefly to record the facts (events,

emotions, thoughts, and objects) that are described in the text.

"Moving Beyond Tolerance in Multicultural Education describes the four incremental levels of multicultural education that should replace monocultural education reflected in most schools today. The four gradual levels, from Tolerance, Acceptance, Respect to Affirmation, Solidarity, and Critique, are shown as ever-increasingly dynamic models for transforming schools."

2. Personal Interpretive Phase: Readers reflect on actual experiences that may be evoked in this encounter with the text. This connects them with their own past.

"To me, it was a rude awakening. I can't help but begin to reflect on the reason why I tried so hard not to identify with being Asian when I was in high school. I wonder if the reason why I felt ashamed of my Asian identification was as a result of not having my cultural heritage celebrated and cultural contribution acknowledged in the school curriculum."

3. Critical Phase: Readers evaluate the arguments put forth in the text to the best of their present judgment.

"It wasn't until after reading Moving Beyond Tolerance that I understood that the school my children attend is one that does not promote diversity. By opting to treat each individual equally and taking the "color blind" approach, the school is providing students with a monocultural education which does not reflect the state's population."

4. Creative Phase: Readers have a future orientation, applying to their lives their new-found knowledge gained as a result of this encounter with the text.

"As a start, I believe I will need to not simply teach my students about my cultural artifacts, but share with them my passion, my view on life, my struggles, and my hope. I believe that it is through opening myself up as a person, and by their knowing me as an individual, that they will begin to catch my vision of celebrating cultural diversity and human complexity."

This Freirean model of literacy is the framework through which all cultural models will be understood. The four phases of the critical reading/writing framework (Neophytos-Richardson, 2001) give prospective teachers a straightforward and simple way to make meaning from the accelerated responses of feelings and thoughts engendered in their teacher education classes. In the context of classroom teaching and learning, the phases of literacy are first introduced and modeled as an "into" for teachers to tackle their own beliefs. Then the cultural models are provided as a "through" process by which teachers can experience the different perspectives. Finally, teachers' reflections become the "beyond" experience leading to new insights and transformation and the cycle begins again.

IV. Analysis and Interpretation

Brian Street (1987) warns researchers not to invest in the cultural ideals and conventions of the dominant culture to the extent that they ignore much of the valuable cultural models of learning. We embrace this statement, and have attempted to share such cultural models with students in their teacher education courses. Among some of the realizations that teachers in our courses have made is that Qur'anic recitation is in fact a valuable, literacy-enhancing practice among Muslims; that intense, reflective dialogue among members of different racial groups, as witnessed in "Color of Fear," can yield

powerful changes in our systems of thought; and that reading articles such as Nieto's can challenge us to not only move to higher levels of multicultural education, but to realize our shortcomings as well.

Furthermore, this kind of "cultural curriculum" has brought about actual change in the way teachers in our courses perceive cultural discourse and their own positions in such an exchange. As our data reflect, in their own writing and in their own voices, future teachers of diverse backgrounds themselves acknowledge a shift in their understanding of value in academia. One candidate writes, *"I have changed my opinion on the word 'tolerance.' It isn't enough. In my last reflection, I felt that tolerance was more than adequate, but I've had a revelation about that subject. Tolerance still fosters a 'those people' mentality. The final step of affirmation, solidarity, and critique . . . that is what I want for my students, for my country and ultimately on a global level."*

The actual teacher education materials proposed in this presentation are particularly relevant considering that they incorporate a multi-media approach to learning, including not only printed studies, but visual and audio data as well. Furthermore, the reflections offered by teachers are authentic perspectives, insofar as they represent the experiences of actual candidates presented in teacher education classes at Chapman University during the 2001-2002 academic year. These perspectives offer touching, frequently fearful admissions of actual transformative changes that have taken place as a result of the teachers' reading or experiencing the described curriculum. One student in our teacher education courses, who had viewed the "Color of Fear" documentary, revealed her own uneasiness with racial profiling at her job description as a flight attendant, *"We were told to look for 'suspicious' people, but given little definition of*

what suspicious meant. Ultimately we based our fears on someone who had represented and looked like the faces constantly flashed on the nightly news and daily papers: Middle Eastern people... Nine times out of ten, the men I watched closely were Middle Eastern".

V. Implications for Future Research

Undoubtedly, teacher education reform is an ever-shifting arena. Some of the curriculum and subsequent teacher reflections we have offered are just a beginning in the discourse on cultural models of learning, literacy, and the shaping of teachers' minds. However, although some of the reflections detail changes in perspective toward cultural discourse and common notions about literacy, some of the teacher reflections carry quite opposite attitudes, attitudes that imply change is difficult to achieve and difficult to bear. For example, after watching the "Color of Fear," one candidate wrote, *"If minorities get a piece of the American Pie then I say "hooray for them" but I'm not exactly going to cry a river for them if they get shut out. I'm neutral on the subject. I know that's a terrible think to say (Lord help me), but those were honestly the feelings running through my head as I watched the video last week."* In the context of the model we are presenting here, communication and reflection become avenues for changing teachers' minds, or, to state it more accurately, for teachers' changing their own minds. As demonstrated in this research, every one, teacher and student alike are presented with the possibility to encounter and make meaning of the way we think and believe and to challenge our own prejudices. When we share our "life experiences, our human knowledge and our cultural truth" (Frederickson 1995: 255) with our students in this place of openness, we are able to hear and be heard, and, consequently, bring about changes in our thinking.

Opposing perspectives may serve as particularly stimulating starters of discussion

as well. One teacher candidate who listened to Marina Aminy speak about Qur'anic education shortly after the September 11th bombing, commented on Marina's choice to wear an Islamic *hijab* or headscarf to the talk, *"Why is it necessary to demonstrate this symbol at a turbulent time? ... Why push the issue? She would be less conspicuous and modest without it, and [could] continue the ritual after the country has had some time to heal and respect her religion. It reminds of the old saying 'there's a time and place for everything.' This isn't the time or the place."*

An Asian-American student, having come to California as an immigrant from Taiwan, and passing through the school system with honors, is now becoming a teacher, and expresses this fear, followed by a possibility, *"The minority groups argue that it is an inherent error for White Americans to presume that they know the minority groups' ethnic struggles in the "mainstream" culture. At the same time, the presumption of minority groups that White Americans are ignorant of the reality of racism lack the desire to reconcile is equally racist. I am afraid that at the end of this struggle to find racial equality, we will lose sight of what we are struggling for in the first place: shared values of love and kindness to each other. I believe that it is through our own perpetual self-evaluation and self-reflection that we come to a deeper understanding of our human condition. It will have to be a joint effort on both sides to find avenues for more honest conversations."*

The researcher, Marina Aminy, herself realized the benefit of reflection as a vehicle of change. When in the midst of her ethnographic study, dealing with apparently conflicting notions of literacy, value, and tolerance, she wrote that, *"I realized that my discomfort was not so much in my concern of what the Qur'an classes were doing for the*

children, but actually over my short sightedness in using my own lens of literacy and language learning to measure the worth and effectiveness of a deeply cultural/religious model of learning. As an "insider" ethnographer I had initially felt that I understood the cultural meaning and religious significance of the Qur'an classes, yet I still fell victim to the biases I had developed as a student in the Academy and as a teacher in public schools."

The researcher, Aspasia Neophytos-Richardson, wrote this reflection while pondering how to help prospective teachers who feel bereft of "cultural material" with which to enrich their teaching, *"Often my students who are about to become teachers express panic in not knowing anything about another culture and yet having to teach a diversity of students. I always reassure them that this is not a problem. Possible new worlds surround them very closely. They have but to open themselves up to the narratives of their students' lives. It has made it easier for me to speak with my own voice, because to do less would be to miss the possibility of mutual renewal."*

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